

The ultimate issue is whether or not our government will allow adults to choose how they want to live their lives -- and whether the government trusts those adults with information about the products they can buy.

At its center, last June's resolution reaffirmed a basic principle that Reynolds Tobacco's 9,700 employees share: We do not want children to smoke. We are committed to and will work toward that goal, regardless of which way the political winds blow.

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By J.M. LAWRENCE

Look Out Junk-Food Junkies, Here Comes The Twinkie Tax

First came sin taxes on smokes and booze -- now meet the Twinkie tax.

Fat people's health problems cost Americans so much money that the nation needs to tax high-fat foods and control fast-food advertising, says a Yale expert on weight and eating disorders.

"To me, there is no difference between Ronald McDonald and Joe Camel," says Dr. Kelly D. Brownell, a psychologist and director of the Yale University Center for Eating & Weight Disorders.

With more obese Americans than ever before and thousands of overweight children, Brownell's plan takes a page straight out of the playbook used against the tobacco industry.

"We have a problem that's out of control," he said. "Some bold way of looking at things needs to come around."

Statistics show more than 300,000 people die prematurely because of diseases related to obesity, he said, while 500,000 die from smoking-related illness.

"We live in a toxic food environment," Brownell said. "Think about what it says about our culture when the typical American recognizes 'supersize' as a verb."

Just as Americans started thinking about fat grams, fast-food franchises fired back with lower prices and tempting offers to upgrade meals with a double helping of fries or a vat of soda. The 99-cent value meal now rules the nation's highways and strip malls.

Movie theater chains use the same strategy, enticing consumers with huge popcorn servings and giant drinks costing almost the same as smaller sizes.

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McDonalds, however, is quick to point out that consumers didn't gobble up the McLean Burger, or the lower fat milkshake or an array of salads the chain later pulled from the menu. Taco Bell's venture into lower-fat tacos fizzled as well.

But Brownell wonders what would have happened to the nation's eating habits if the McLean had cost a fraction of the Big Mac or if a banana were a low-cost option next to a Bacon, Egg and Cheese Biscuit.

"Are we going to have legislation tomorrow? No," Brownell said. "But we have to start thinking about this in a more militant way."

A Twinkie tax, he argues, could be used to subsidize the cost of fruits and vegetables and to fund public health campaigns to teach Americans better nutrition. He's now refining his tax idea and is penning a book.

But experts who work with overweight people said a tax won't curb America's growing waistline. A pint of Ben and Jerry's would have to cost a fortune to lose out to an apple, they said.

"It's a bizarre idea," said Barbara Ganzer of the New England Center for Overcoming Overeating. "It sounds like the food police to me."

Cheap high-calorie and high-fat foods, she said, have little to do with why people overeat. The true reason is people lose touch with their own internal "fullness" mechanisms and begin to see food as "something that feeds our feelings," she said.

Jody Abrams of the National Association to Advance Fat Acceptance calls the tax idea "silly" and argues health advocates have overblown the risks of being fat.

"It's less about the number on the scale and more about exercise and what you put in your body," she said.

Her group, which plans a "Million Pound March" this summer in Los Angeles, has already fired off letters accusing Brownell of fueling a culture that villifies fat people.

But Michael Jacobson, executive director of the Center for Science in the Public Interest - whose reports have warned about the dangers of movie popcorn, chimichangas and General Gao's chicken -- said a fat tax is worth debating.

"Diet and lack of exercise kill as many people as tobacco," Jacobson said. "And Ronald McDonald is certainly America's pied piper, encouraging kids to eat a diet loaded with calories and fat."

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